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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CODEL LANGEVIN

¶1. (SBU) Congressmen: We warmly welcome your visit to Afghanistan

¶2. (SBU) The government and the public here have welcomed the United States' new strategic purpose to defeat al Qaeda and its supporters and to prevent their return to Afghanistan and Pakistan. To accomplish this, President Obama's strategy rests on three operational lines: strengthening security, building access to justice and broader governance capacity at both the national and local levels, and developing the economy. To meet these challenges, we are expanding the U.S. military presence (both to protect the Afghan people and to train Afghan security forces to assume that full burden in future), and the number of U.S. civilians working in a range of disciplines throughout Afghanistan, with concentration in the most sensitive Southern and Eastern regions. The most immediate political objective, which we share with the Afghans and our Coalition partners, is to ensure the legitimacy and transparency of the August 20 presidential and provincial council elections.

Elections

¶3. (SBU) The August elections influence nearly everything political here. Presidential candidate registration closed May 8, and at least 44 candidates turned in completed registration forms. President Karzai appears to hold a significant advantage over his nearest competitors: ex-Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, ex-Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani, and Deputy Speaker of the Lower House Mirwais Yaseni. In the end, only those three of the half-dozen rumored top-tier challengers registered, alongside relatively obscure running mates, signaling a lack of broad-based support for their campaigns among Afghanistan's political powerbrokers. Other registered candidates of note include two women who are as unknown nationally as the other candidates. Karzai is confident that he will win re-election.

¶4. (SBU) Sensing the popular mood, both Karzai and opposition candidates alike claim to welcome international support for a level playing field and free and transparent elections. The Independent Election Commission (IEC), with strong international backing and technical support from UNDP, has worked to even the odds somewhat and to foster at least theoretical opportunity for real competition. The IEC resisted Karzai's ploys to advance the election date to Spring 2009, which would have cut off the opposition's nascent attempts at organization. It issued a decree in May spelling out government officials' duty of impartiality. A key part of its mission is to ensure that government media provide equal access to candidates. The IEC will fund some \$2 million in private air time for candidates - money that comes from our \$40 million contribution to the \$224 million election budget. We are stepping up our own voter education work with women, youth, media, and other civil society groups, adding an extra \$700,000 in State Department

democracy program funding in May. We and others in the international community are pressing the government to issue its own Hatch Act-like regulations, and urging it to finalize a media law strengthening protections for freedom of expression, including in political campaigns.

Complex Security Situation

¶15. (SBU) The Afghan people and their government regard civilian casualties resulting from coalition operations as the most sensitive security issue. You will arrive following a recent joint Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) and Coalition investigation, examining events surrounding a complex series of Taliban attacks on civilians, ANSF and Coalition forces in Farah province. The joint investigation team has confirmed that some number of civilians were killed in the course of the fighting, but has been unable to determine with certainty which of those casualties were Taliban fighters and which were non-combatants. The challenge of how to balance security operations and non-combatant protection continues. ISAF Commander General McKiernan directed in December substantial changes to coalition tactics, techniques and procedures to minimize civilian casualties. If confirmed by the Senate, General Stanley McChrystal will succeed General McKiernan as Commander of U.S. Forces and of ISAF (International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan).

¶16. (SBU) Afghanistan will remain short of security personnel for at least several years. There are about 80,000 Afghan army, about 87,000 Afghan police, and about 58,000

KABUL 00001321 002 OF 004

international military personnel to maintain security. The Afghan army is growing by more than 2,500 personnel per month and should reach 134,000 in 2011. U.S. forces are expected to top 68,000 in 2010; there are approximately 32,000 non-U.S. international forces in Afghanistan. We are working with Interior Minister Atmar to accelerate police reform and training, reduce corruption, and create vetted, specialized police units.

Developing Governance Abilities

¶17. (SBU) Karzai's state and government suffer from inability to deliver essential services, compounded by endemic corruption, poverty, criminality, insurgency and ethno-tribal politics, all exacerbated by three decades of war and misrule since the Russian invasion of 1979. Electoral dynamics are further complicating the problem, leading Karzai to make expedient decisions on one hand, but also to appoint top-flight leaders like Minister Atmar to deliver police services. Nonetheless, rapid transformation is underway in Afghanistan and there is much to work with. Atmar is only one among a solid group of impressively capable and clean technocratic leaders. What the state and civil society lack in broad institutional capacity is offset by the striking dedication, energy and patriotism of many Afghans, including many who have returned from comfortable lives abroad to rebuild their country. The energy and ambition of Afghan youth are particularly striking at the burgeoning university campuses.

¶18. (U) In order to accelerate improved responsiveness in Afghan institutions and local capacity, our new strategy requires an increase in the U.S. civilian presence alongside the increases in U.S. military personnel. New positions in Afghanistan under consideration in the FY-09 supplemental request from all agencies would total 421. There are many more positions with separate funding mechanisms. Of the 421, we will fill 56 by July 2009, 49 in the field and 7 in Kabul. The remaining 365, split between 224 in the field and 141 in Kabul, will arrive between August 2009 and March 2010, phased in coordination with arrival of military units and

establishment of safer operating environments. The new civilians will join various State Department and USAID elements, the Department of Justice (DOJ) prosecutors and the FBI (Legal Attache), the Departments of Agriculture, Treasury, Homeland Security (DHS), Transportation (DOT), and Health and Human Services (HHS/CDC), as well as the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

¶9. (SBU) In Kabul, the focus is on Afghans creating a merit-based, professional bureaucracy; and building its capacity to deliver services to the public. Strong ministries include Foreign Affairs, Defense, Public Health, Education, Finance, Communications, Rural Development, and Counternarcotics. Interior and Agriculture stand out among ministries for strong leadership. We also work effectively with the other ministries, although mixed agendas or a legacy of weakness slow progress. For instance, the Supreme Court and the Ministry of Justice suffer from the acute lack of qualified professionals, a legal system that combines elements of Sharia, tribal, and Western law, and a lack of national consensus on the way forward.

¶10. (SBU) Outside Kabul, U.S. civilian and military efforts aim to strengthen local government at all levels, through Brigade Task Forces, PRTs, and (with the upcoming civilian increase) District Support Teams. We work with traditional leadership structures as well as those who gained power through force or wealth during the days of conflict, but who have proven ready to cooperate with constitutional government and rule of law. Lack of local consensus, traditionally weak connections between the capital and provinces, long-standing personal, ethnic, and tribal rivalries and distrust, and the presence of insurgents or criminals complicate our task. The goal is to support and help develop responsive, reliable leadership in local communities, reciprocally bound to the capital.

Little Momentum on Taliban reconciliation -----

¶11. (SBU) President Obama stated U.S. policy on reconciliation March 27: "There will be no peace without reconciliation among former enemies... That's why we will work with local leaders, the Afghan government, and international partners to have a reconciliation process in every province." Afghans broadly welcomed that U.S. policy. Nonetheless, reconciliation with Taliban or other insurgent

KABUL 00001321 003 OF 004

leaders remains controversial. Many welcome the possibility of reduced violence and instability, while others (mainly non-Pashtuns, women, and certain civil society groups) fear an intra-Pashtun deal could come at the expense of their interests. So far, government reconciliation efforts have been premised on respect for the constitution. Although the Fall 2008 Saudi attempt to begin talks generated much interest, it has yielded no visible progress. Karzai credits Egypt's Sheikh al-Azhar with a substantial helpful role, and hopes for further support from al-Azhar for the reconciliation process.

Economy -----

¶12. (SBU) Recovery in agricultural production, following severe drought in 2008, is expected to boost real economic growth to about nine percent in 2009-10. Governor Fitrat leads the Central Bank well. Inflation is virtually flat, and the Afghan currency is stable. The pre-election period is not conducive to implementing economic reforms to support private sector development. That said, relatively young, dynamic and reformist ministers of Finance, Commerce and Agriculture are taking positive steps to improve the business climate. Afghanistan's key economic challenge is to establish conditions for self-sustaining growth and

strengthen fiscal sustainability so that it can reduce dependence on foreign aid over time. It remains one of the poorest countries in the world and far from meeting this goal.

¶13. (SBU) In our economic assistance programs, the U.S. is gradually channeling more aid through the Afghan government, and urging other donors to do the same, while ensuring proper transparency and accountability. Our motto is: "Afghan leadership, Afghan capacity, Afghan sustainability." The U.S. is also placing renewed emphasis in its assistance programs supporting agriculture, both as a basis for sustainable growth and to create licit economic alternatives to the insurgency and poppy cultivation. U.S. assistance will focus on agriculture programs that create jobs, develop roads and water systems supporting farm production and trade, and expand farm credit opportunities. We are also encouraging greater Af-Pak cooperation, for example to enable transshipment of Afghan agricultural exports across Pakistan to the massive Indian market.

Human Rights Work Ahead

¶14. (SBU) Civil society activists and the Ministry of Women's Affairs drafted a progressive domestic violence bill, currently under review by the Ministry of Justice. More generally, a thin but outspoken stratum of Afghan society increasingly is giving voice to a desire for positive political reform and social change -- reflecting the outlooks of an extremely young demographic in this conservative society. Nonetheless, other aspects of Afghanistan's human rights record remain poor, including violence and discrimination against women, lack of due process and weak rule of law, and intimidation restricting the exercise of free speech. In the face of powerful conservative religious and tribal patriarchal traditions, the Afghan government has shown a lack of sustained will to press forward a systematic campaign to promote and protect human rights, particularly women's rights.

¶15. (SBU) We, and others, are tracking two high profile cases involving freedom of religious expression. In October 2008, the Afghan Supreme Court upheld a local court's conviction and 20-year prison sentence for student Sayed Pervez Kambakhsh, for distributing an article over the internet about women's rights that allegedly defamed Islam. The international community is pushing for a presidential pardon, and we would ask you to do the same with Karzai. Also, Ghows Zalmai and Mullah Qari Mushtaq are challenging their 20-year sentences, handed down by a Kabul Appeals Court in February, for publishing and distributing a Dari translation of the Koran that did not include the original Arabic text - an act considered sacrilegious by extremely doctrinaire Muslims.

¶16. (SBU) In March President Karzai signed a Shia Family Law with provisions that would violate women's constitutional guarantee to equal rights. Pressure from the USG, the international community, and Afghan human rights activists has blocked its enactment, pending a constitutional review by the Ministry of Justice. We continue to raise our concerns with the law and our expectation of a transparent review process inclusive of women and civil society.

Narcotics: Positive Trends, Challenge in the South

KABUL 00001321 004 OF 004

¶17. (SBU) The narcotics challenge continues in the south, where seven provinces now account for 98 percent of the country's opium, and narcotics trafficking and the insurgency have become mutually sustaining. To support the Government of Afghanistan and local people in confronting it, we have organized a civilian-military Combined Joint Inter-Agency Task Force (CJIATF) with U.K. and Canadian participation. Its anti-narcotics operations invariably occur with

substantial Afghan police and/or participation, as we aim to build Afghan security force capacities in counternarcotics (CN) as well as counter-insurgency (COIN). CJIATF has begun comprehensive counter-narcotics planning for 2009-2010 combining the full range of civilian and military resources. We are now increasing our focus on boosting licit agriculture, improving local governance, and increasing interdiction of drug traffickers to disrupt the link between narcotics trafficking and the insurgency. We will continue poppy eradication efforts, but will shift emphasis and resources more towards the former objectives.

¶18. (SBU) Poppy cultivation remains extensive, and costly eradication efforts can yield mixed results in COIN terms. Hence we are de-emphasizing eradication while increasing interdiction efforts via CJIATF and providing alter nations rural livelihoods through agricultural development. Nevertheless, there is some promising news. Poppy cultivation dropped by 19 percent in 2008, the first reduction since 2005. Just as notably, poppy-free provinces grew from 13 to 18, or more than half of all provinces. Governors in three formerly major poppy cultivating provinces - Badakhshan, Balkh, and Nangarhar - have succeeded in eliminating or nearly eliminating poppy cultivation. Poppy cultivation has died away by itself in other parts of the north and east of the country. This year, Helmand Governor Gulabuddin Mangal, whose province produces more than half of Afghanistan's opium poppy, conducted a comprehensive multi-season campaign against poppy cultivation in a 100-square mile area of central Helmand. Mangal's campaign combined public information, agricultural assistance, and law enforcement, including eradication by Afghan police with force protection from the Afghan army. The UN Office for Drugs and Crime believes poppy cultivation has dropped substantially in Helmand and predicts more poppy-free provinces in other parts of the country.

International Community and Afghanistan

¶19. (SBU) Relations between the government and the international community are uneven. The UN presence is strong; SRSG Kai Eide plays a key coordination role, but suffers from insufficient budgetary and personnel commitment from New York. President Obama, Secretary Clinton, and Special Representative Holbrooke have rallied world attention and increased resources for the Afghan-Pakistan complex of threats to regional stability. International support is holding as demonstrated at recent conferences, including the March 31 Hague Conference where more than 80 countries and international organizations reaffirmed their long-term commitment to Afghanistan and the April 2009 JCMB where donors committed to providing funding for an almost 5,000 member increase in the Kabul police force in time for August elections.
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